MMOZine

Issue 38 | April 2012

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HANDS-ON PREVIEW!

TERA

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

DUST 514

TRIBES: ASCEND

GUILD WARS 2

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TERA
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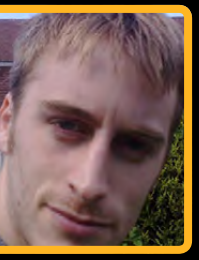

In the review section this month we've critiqued a game which doesn't necessarily belong under the umbrella term 'MMO'. Yet despite its competitive FPS trappings, *Tribes: Ascend* is as complex a multiplayer experience as they come, fresh from the minds of the makers of *Global Agenda*.

The MMO label is beginning to mean less and less nowadays as more developers strive for online-only experiences but for us that's perfect, as it means we can talk about games which wouldn't usually belong in this niche magazine.

With the new and improved design of *MMOZine* we'll strive to bring you not only the games which are well within the confines of our titular speciality, like *Guild Wars 2* and *TERA*, but also those which are using the free-to-play model to open their wares up to a new audience. Some of these games will surprise you, others will pass you by, but in introducing them we hope that we can bring you a much more varied and interesting monthly magazine. Let's go have some fun!

Andy Griffiths, Editor
mmozine@gamerzines.com

Don't miss! *This month's highlights!*

QUICK FINDER

RaiderZ
TERA
Star Wars: The Old Republic
Command & Conquer: Tiberium Alliances
Defiance
Guild Wars 2
Dust 514
Tribes: Ascend

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RAIDERZ FIRST LOOK

HOT NEW SHOTS!

PUB: FROGSTER
DEV: MAEIT ENT.
LAST GAME: GUNZ: THE DUEL
ETA: SUMMER

TWITTER

@IRGRL
Dungeons & Dragons, Neverwinter, and RaiderZ to Headline at Pax East.

@DevilsMMO
Raiderz' alpha is over. See the monsters at PAX East in Boston.

@ArdyBallyhoo
RaiderZ is pretty cool in alpha now. Anxiously watching to see what else comes from it.

TWEET US @GAMERZINES

On the hunt for a PvE-centric MMO?

If you're looking for an example to showcase the cultural divide between East and West, you'd be hard pressed to find a more affective example than *Monster Hunter*. It isn't that we can't see the appeal in tracking and taking down imaginatively designed foes, but it's just easier for us to compartmentalise it alongside Pachinko and Para Para Dancing.

Frogster are hoping *RaiderZ* can be the game which breaks the xenophobic barrier with a similar combat model to *TERA* and enticing enemy designs which constantly keep you guessing. One quest you'll be facing a tall lizard creature, while the next you'll be trying to kill a cat. Sort of.

Quests are story-driven, with some nonsense about the world needing to be saved, but it's the odd-looking enemies which won us over during a recent demo. To further support this variation there over 350 talents to choose from when creating your character, with classes sidelined allowing players to choose whatever skillset they wish. If that sounds a bit too hardcore then you might want to move onto more casual experiences.

Like *Monster Hunter* you'll need multiple adventurers in your team to take down enemies and due to their intimidating size, conquering feels like a real achievement. That's something few Western MMOs can boast, outside high-level dungeon runs, and it'll be interesting to see how *Raiderz* evolves in the future. ■

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DEFIANCE

PUB: TRION WORLDS
DEV: IN-HOUSE

FIRST LOOK

ONE TO WATCH!

Synergising for success

Launching an MMO is a tough endeavour at the best of times, let alone if you're trying to shackle its development together with a tie-in TV show, especially one produced by Syfy, but Trion Worlds aren't a developer to shy away from a challenge. Their debut, *RIFT*, was proof of that, and it seems the stakes are even higher for *Defiance*, however early footage seems to suggest development is on the right track.

You can see the first Alpha footage by clicking the giant play button on the right and from the looks of things gameplay is very fast-paced with vehicular combat, lots of different weapons, massive insectoid enemies and the capability for dozens of players to take place in battles on the same server.

Cynically its easy to see *Defiance* as an experiment in media synergy, but if both the TV show and the game pull their weight, it could be something very special indeed. ■

Watch the show, play the game

As you'll have guessed from the footage, *Defiance* is set in the near-future with the remnants of humanity struggling to survive on a drastically transformed Earth. According to Trion events from the show and the game will be intrinsically linked with events from the small screen influencing those on the even smaller screen next to your keyboard and mouse, and vice versa.

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INCOMING

HOT NEWS FROM THE MMO WORLD!

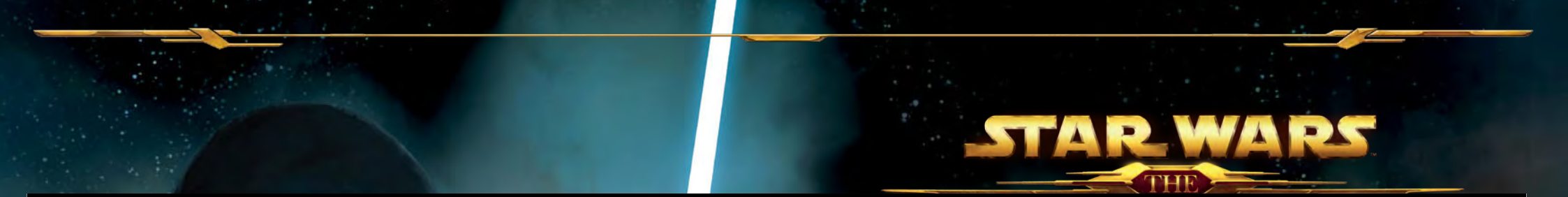
LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

PUB: TURBINE
DEV: IN-HOUSE

OUT NOW

On April 17th *Lord of the Rings Online* celebrated its five-year anniversary. To celebrate, Turbine carried out a host of in-game celebrations, delaying the annual Spring Festival and dispensing lots of items to reward premium and VIP players who've been with the game for over a year, most notably a special in-game cloak. With the introduction of mounted combat via the Riders of Rohan pay-to-play expansion and Turbine's commitment to delivering the grand story-arc associated with Tolkein's fiction, it seems this MMORPG is going from strength to strength. Here's to the next five years!

CLICK EACH GAME FOR MORE INFO



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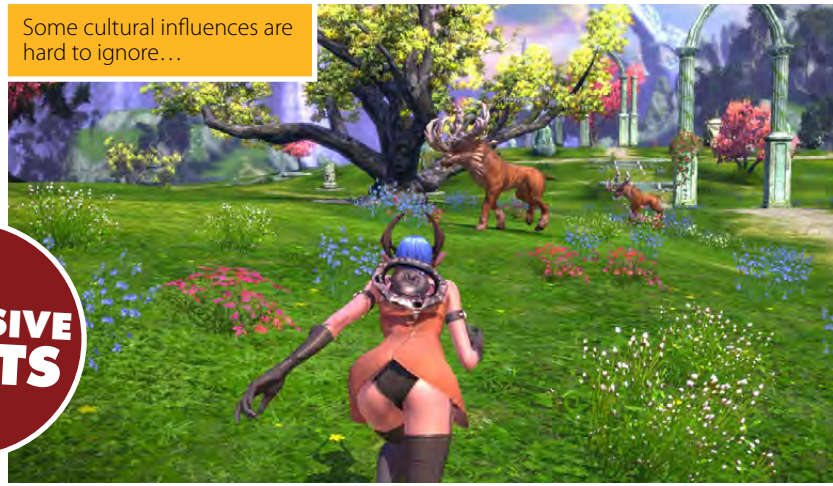
Some cultural influences are hard to ignore…



TERA
HANDS-ON

EXCLUSIVE SHOTS

PUB: FROGSTER
DEV: BLUEHOLE STUDIO
LAST GAME: N/A
ETA: 3RD MAY

Five hours in Arborea

Mention 'Korean' and 'MMORPG' in the same sentence and the words 'repetitive combat' will usually follow. It's an odd kind of acceptable xenophobia that permeates online gaming, and for the most part it's rather accurate, but in this case those labels only tell half the story.

Unlike Western releases, *TERA* focuses less on story – at least during the first 10 levels – and more on establishing a fantasy world which is populated by creatures which are often as enchanting as they are bizarre. The races themselves are imaginative enough, with the players able to select between sexy Elf-like Castanic, made of stone Baraka and soft panda people, the Popori among others, and the combat roles are also surprisingly varied with traditional archetypes like Warrior and Archer flanked by more elaborate selections like Lancer and Slayer. Couple these choices with plenty of customisation options – ranging from jaw width to voice pitch – and it's easy to spend an hour just fiddling around.

We selected a Baraka Lancer to start off and were unceremoniously cast onto Dawn Island with only a brief cut-scene to celebrate our arrival. With the great effort

TWITTER

@Faracon
Two more days until #TERA. Join up with Gamestalgia's International Serpentis Isle Guild. Everyone is welcome.

@quintosmark
#TERA downloading. :) So excited for this game.

@Liandreth
Yay, got more members in Kith and Kin in #TERA! Check out @KithKinTERA for more info! =)

@schumacke
You going to play @TERAonline on Jagged Coast? Follow me and let have some fun on #Tera =)

TWEET US @GAMERZINES

TERA even has its own democratic framework allowing players to vote for one of their own to run select villages and towns.

Despite utilising the Unreal 3 engine, *TERA* actually has a very vibrant look and feel.

modern MMOs often invest in creating an atmosphere where players are the last hope of their race, so it was actually rather nice to feel like a normal cog in an exceptionally colourful world.

Even though *TERA* utilises the Unreal 3 engine, the greys and browns associated with that tech are nowhere to be seen, instead the world looks and feels vibrant with lush green pastures, floating crystals and a vast mixture of imaginative wildlife – all of which are superbly animated.

When we think about it, MMORPGs harbour quite violent tendencies, with players actively encouraged to slay any living creature in their way, and in Aborea that sentiment soon proved unshakable as we took quest after quest which asked us to kindly kill lots of different creature, some cute some ugly, and often with a wall of text to support the slaughter. In all honesty though, *TERA* is one of the few MMOs where it'll take you sometime to actually get to grips with combat, as there's no auto-targeting. Instead where you aim your reticule determines how much damage you cause, and to further mix combat up, enemies will often have different attack stances, powered-up offensives and animations spotlighting finishing moves. It's a fantastic system which forces you to engage with your enemy as you dodge their attacks and carefully aim your own which is perhaps why we felt a bit guilty stabbing the cuter of Dawn Island's critters in the face with a large pointy stick.

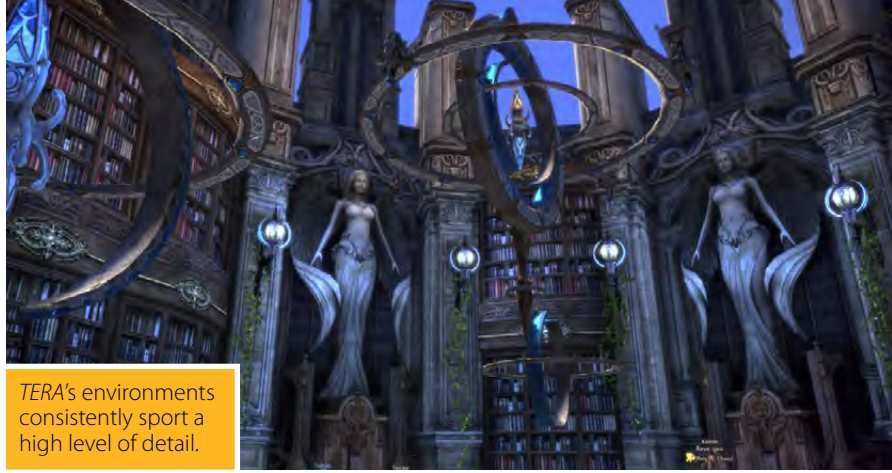
"We felt a bit guilty stabbing the cuter of Dawn Island's critters in the face"

IF LOOKS COULD KILL

Arborea certainly isn't a tranquil place, despite appearances, and further exploration proved that fact with PvP challenges regularly popping up as we neared key landmarks. We can definitely see Bluehole's MMO becoming the PvP paradise it was so obviously created to be, with a separate deathmatch mode allowing players to place wagers on themselves to win more gold in coming battles. Couple that nifty functionality with a customisable UI, auto-run,

Yes there are mini-pets and yes they're exceptionally cute.

Even though melee and ranged combat feel different, both specialities involve chaining attacks.



TERA's environments consistently sport a high level of detail.

a crafting system with a mind-numbing amount of consumables and even the ability to use a controller, and it's impossible to describe *TERA* as anything less than fully featured. After completing a dozen or so quests and cracking open one lucky egg containing a teleport scroll, we found ourselves in Velika, one of the capital cities. Here we discovered a bit more about how the nuts and bolts of exploration will work with all areas of the continent level gated in order to prevent players from arriving too early. Unfortunately that safeguard didn't work, as we found ourselves two levels too short to return to the starter island, effectively marooning us on the mainland.

We could still jet around the local area via flying horses and even 'level leach' off others players to boost our expertise to the required level, but still this MMORPG's polished exterior was starting to show a few blemishes. That isn't to say we didn't witness a few more of *TERA*'s tricks however, such as stamina replenishing campfires. Any player at any time can start their own fire to recharge their health, and as we ventured outside the city we spotted adventurers racing around these spontaneous rest spots interacting with each other in a way which felt very organic.

Spending five hours with any game isn't nearly enough time to form a critical opinion, but we can say that *TERA* is certainly much more than meets the eye. This fantasy experience is bursting with original gameplay ideas and excellent artistic design. On the story front it seems to be lacking, but with both *Guild Wars 2* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* focusing on crafting a compelling character-driven narrative, it's refreshing to play a game which doesn't excuse what it is – a great place to have adventures with other gamers. Expect a full review next month. ■

> *"It's impossible to describe TERA as anything less than fully featured"*

Velika is a nice city to visit, but you don't want to get stuck there.

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GUILD WARS 2
HANDS-ON

PUB: NCSOFT
DEV: ARENANET
LAST GAME: GUILD WARS
ETA: WHEN IT'S READY!

TWITTER

@guildwars2
There are a lot of Easter eggs scattered around in the world in Tyria in #GW2.

@I_Eilan_I
Thief, Necromancer and Mesmer looks like the more interesting professions so far. Maybe Elementalist too.

@navigatorsghost
"A necromancer must always have many enemies, for he will always have many hungry followers" #headspacequotes

@Shaella_
The only thing that keeps me going now is Guild Wars 2.

@Lowenenen
Guild Wars 2 looks soooo good!

TWEET US @GAMERZINES

Fancy a little necromancy?

Humans are boring. There, we've said it. If we want to escape into a hostile fantasy world occupied by anthropomorphic warrior cats, plant people and tiny Dwarf inventors, the last biological construct we want to play as is a slimy human. Alas, during the latest preview weekend for *Guild Wars 2*, our choices were rather limited. With our experiences as a Charr catalogued in the last issue, and the Sylvari and Asura race selections still greyed out in the character creation screen, it was time to become a member of Tyria's marginalised human faction.

Their empire that once spanned the entire continent has been pushed back to Divinity's Reach, with its surrounding areas beset upon by armies of centaurs and other indigenous creatures, but rather than being humanity's last hope, when you create a character you're just another cog in the war machine. That's a welcome change, even if we did decide to roll out as a life-sucking Necromancer with a Blood Fiend regularly in tow. You'd think that would be worth commenting upon during the early story quests, but alas not.

Like with the Charr, before you create a human character you need to determine their background. For our Necromancer we were met with choices regarding our upbringing (nobility, street rat, commoner) and selecting our biggest regret (not performing in a circus, not saving our sister, not knowing our real parents). These decisions are consistently referred to, at least during the early quests, and as we chose to create an orphaned pauper, we got mixed up with lovable rogues struggling to make ends meet, and unsavoury gangsters looking for their share.

›

ROLL OVER FOR INFO!

If you choose the right personal choice, you may even get to go to the circus…

Unfortunately both Sylvari and Asura races weren't available during this Beta weekend. Maybe next time?

The plot never reached Guy Ritchie proportions of Cockney mischief, but themes surrounding urban subculture were certainly in abundance. It's refreshing to compare these early beginnings with the Charr, which was entirely different. With the Warrior race you felt constantly on edge to prove your worth, whereas when playing as a human the atmosphere was much more relaxed despite the scope of Divinity's Reach dwarfing anything we've seen in *Guild Wars 2* thus far.

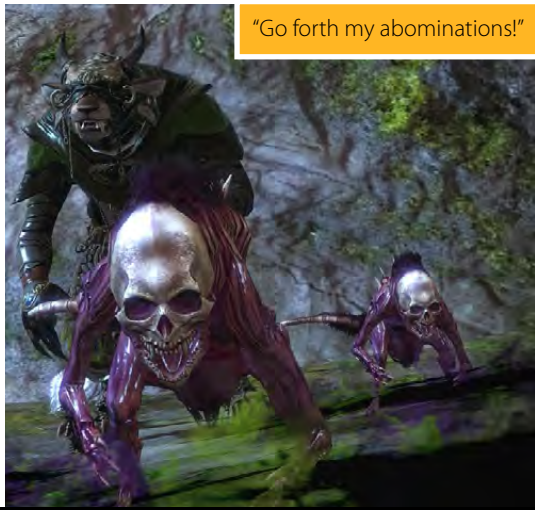
Once we wandered out of the city, *Guild Wars 2* began to feel more familiar, with rolling hills, farmers needing to be saved and passages opening up to show massive cave dwellings. Public quests are more numerous than personal quests, but this means you don't need to be shackled to other players to see the really cool group content, like massive bosses and team-based objectives.

Due to us choosing another ranged-based class, combat felt mostly the same, with the Necromancer specialising in health-leeching attacks and the ability to summon arms from beneath the ground to attack anyone unfortunate to be stuck in the area of effect circle. In addition to those skills there was also the ability to transform into a Death Shroud when dishing out enough damage, keeping your body safe from harm while allowing more health-zapping attacks. Seeing our dark form envelope human enemies was great fun and led to appreciative remarks from other adventurers. Unfortunately we didn't have enough time to gain attacks which could make enemies run away in fear or become expert with a few different staffs, but we certainly fell in love with the stylish visuals which accompanied necro combat.

"You don't need to be shackled to other players to see the really cool group content"

GETTING PERSONAL

The only problem we came across was during the personal story missions. When teamed up with other players, you'll receive a pop-up asking if you want to join their instanced mission when initiated, which instantly transports you to their destination. There's no need to wait or travel long distances, that part of the system is perfect. You can easily help with combat



"Go forth my abominations!"

Centaurs are the griefers of the *Guild Wars* universe.

without any fuss, but you can't participate in any conversations in that mission, instead only the owner can. You don't even see the cut-scene showing what's going on, instead you can only wait in the environment before more combat kicks in. Now *The Old Republic* had a lot of problems when it came to plot implementation, but ArenaNet has missed a trick not implementing a similar system in *Guild Wars 2*. For a game which is otherwise so welcoming of players teaming up, the inability to see what is going on with NPCs feels like a big oversight. Understandably the personal stories are exactly that, but there's no reason for a friend to not see a conversation taking place, even if they're just a bystander.

A few more new features were also introduced during our playthrough, including the new overflow system which eliminates the problem of traditional server queues – now you can adventure on a holding server keeping all your progress while waiting for a spot to free up – and the introduction of the gem-based in-game store. For a one-fee game we were a little apprehensive about *Guild War 2*'s micro-transactions, but after using the store there's really nothing to worry about. Basically gems are purchased for real money and can be used to buy special cosmetic items via the in-game shop, alternatively the gems can also be sold to other players for in-game gold. It's a similar system to one used in *EVE Online* and should keep the economic transactions within the community, lessening the impact of gold farmers – at least that's the theory.

> *"ArenaNet's sequel is already an immensely polished and beautiful experience"*

Unsurprisingly, our second weekend with *Guild Wars 2* left a similarly positive impression to our first. ArenaNet's sequel is already an immensely polished and beautiful experience which hinges on great new ideas while harking back to the principles which made the first game so beloved. We suspect development is still going strong regarding the more left-field races like the Sylvari and the Asura, hence the reason they aren't available in the Beta as of yet, but at least the Charr and humans are enjoyable to play as. Rolling out as a fleshy biped is still the most boring selection to be made, but it certainly has its charms. ■

ZOOM

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DANIEL ERICKSON
STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC
INTERVIEW

We discuss the 'Legacy' Update with TOR's Lead Designer

PUB: ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEV: BIOWARE AUSTIN
ETA: OUT NOW

BIO

Daniel Erickson is one of several key visionaries at BioWare. He's previously worked on *Dragon Age: Origins* and is *TOR*'s lead designer having dedicated over seven years to this project.

Over the past month BioWare launched the largest update yet for its debut MMO, and despite a few teething issues – one of which took down servers for an entire day – there was plenty to get excited about, with a customisable UI, new PvE missions and a legacy system which offers special bonuses between alts. We caught up with *TOR*'s main man Daniel Erickson to ask what were the reasons behind its inception and what the launch was actually like for the team…

The 'Legacy' update contains a fair set of features. How many man hours are behind its development?

We do our updates throughout development, so we're working on one while the other one is going out. The legacy system itself was in production long before *TOR* came out; there's a lot of history in this update. This stuff has been in production since basically right after launch. What you got in game update one was what we were working on before launch, the thinking behind 1.2 was, 'Right the game is out the door, let's do something big'.

The inclusion which really caught our eye was the Tauntaun mini-pet and one month's free game time for *TOR*'s most committed players. How important is it to reward existing subscribers?

Loyalty is always something you want to reward and we have far more plans in the future for that. There is something fantastic about knowing

> **"THERE IS SOMETHING FANTASTIC ABOUT KNOWING THAT THE COMMUNITY YOU LOVE, LOVES YOU BACK"**

> "WHAT WE'RE DOING NOW IS RESPONDING TO THE PART OF THE GAME THAT WORKED"

> "I WOULD STILL DESCRIBE THE LAUNCH AS MIRACULOUS"

that the community you love, loves you back. As a subscription service you need to be extremely aware of your subscribers; who are sticking with you and who are going to be around. We did stuff for the founders saying 'Hey we recognise that you guys were here right from the beginning, you took the risk of buying an MMO on launch day and we know what that's like'. And this time we said, 'Hey, we brought this out, here's a little bit of something for everybody and something to look forward to while you're downloading that giant patch'.

We can't fathom the challenges with launching an MMO, but from the outside at least the launch seemed fairly smooth. What do you think about the launch now? Were there things you could have done better?
There were definitely things we could have done better, but I still would describe the launch as miraculous. We were all sitting as either players or developers who worked on MMOs, we all knew the dangers of those early days – day one, day two, and our rolling launch… To give you an idea of our rolling launch, people come in and play early to try and smooth things out a little, and we believe that there were more players per day than had ever gone into any game anywhere, so it was very scary.

Huge props to our server team who obviously were sweating bullets and held up an incredibly strong service during that time.

The fact that *TOR* is so story-centric as well, even people who weren't hooked on traditional MMOs were interested. It seems like there's a successful base to build upon…
What's really nice is that we're starting to see who that base really is. We've learned some things and we talk about it, as in the beginning you build a game which you think is going to work well. What we're now doing is responding to the part of your game that worked and we're looking at what the community loves about our game and why they're here.

That brings us nicely to the staggering amount of skills that have been nerfed in 1.2. Is that purely due to feedback?
Feedback and balance. What players always say is that, 'The class I'm playing is underpowered', or if it's overpowered they won't mention it. If we catch wind of something either in internal testing, forums, looking at an anomaly or statistics then we get everybody down to look at it. We pool all the stats and the logs detailed what kind of damage players are doing, etc. And then the combat guys get in there and really pull it apart. The primary things are always balance, fairness and keeping the game pacing how we want it to. ■

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DUST 514
NEW INFO

PUB: CCP GAMES
DEV: IN-HOUSE
LAST GAME: EVE ONLINE
ETA: AUTUMN 2012

TWITTER

@CliveHunt
Is Dust 514 the saving grace for the #ps3?

@CCP Games
So many people in the PvP arena playing #dust514. Feels great to get in the hands of players!

@EastonBiondiShi
Dust 514: PS3, PS Vita Integration, Eve Online, Strategic Customisation

@thebigb82
Never did get an invite to Dust 514, all depressed now

@clarkpetrounov
PlayStation 3's Free-to-Play Online Shooter (Dust 514) is looking pretty sick.

TWEET US @GAMERZINES

EVE as you've never seen it before

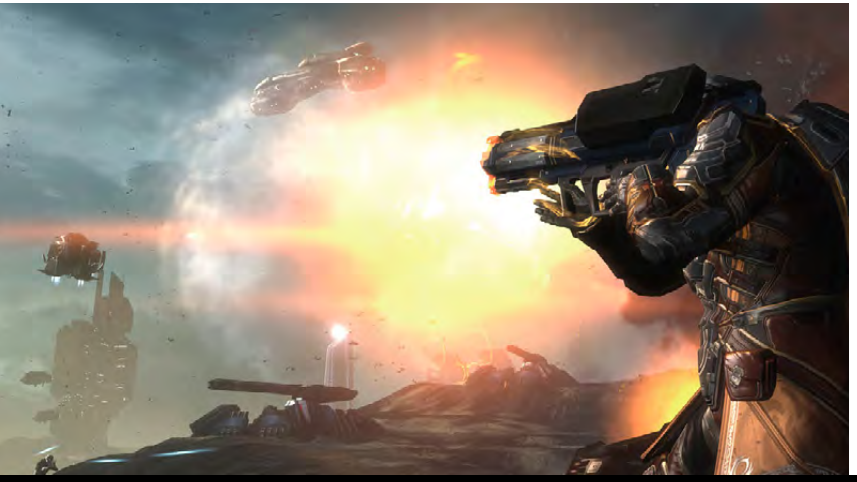
This is definitely the first time we've allowed a PS3-exclusive to enter the hallowed halls of *MMOZine*, but *Dust 514* isn't your average online experience, and CCP certainly aren't an average developer. The house that *EVE* built has been working on something very special over the past three years and during PAX East they finally allowed the public to see and sample their unique free-to-play shooter, and it seems even the spaceship-loving audience has come back impressed.

The heart of the appeal is as follows: while the dominant factions of *EVE* fight for superiority in space, *Dust 514*'ers do the same on the ground with galactic lines concurrently being redrawn. Basically the way it'll work is that PC players will set jobs on a contested planet – be it taking down a command post, hacking networks etc. – and the console players will elect to carry them out, earning them ISK to spend on upgrading and customisation their weapons, armour and loadout to an insanely anal degree. Like *EVE*, CCP are building *Dust 514* to cater to ludicrous amounts of player choice with regards to changing around the basic class-based archetypes – say arming your scout with a bazooka, or kitting out your tank with additional automated defences rather than an extra turret. All items will either be unlocked via in-game experience, ISK (in-game currency) or AUR (cash) – a system CCP has employed before.

This interplay adds a new avenue to the *EVE* universe, while still

ROLL OVER FOR INFO!

The console folk will perform any mission their PC masters ordain.



keeping the spacefarers completely in control – they can even fire down planetary missiles to favour one side during battle over another. In griefing terms alone this system

> *"The relationship between EVE and Dust 514 is what interests us the most"*

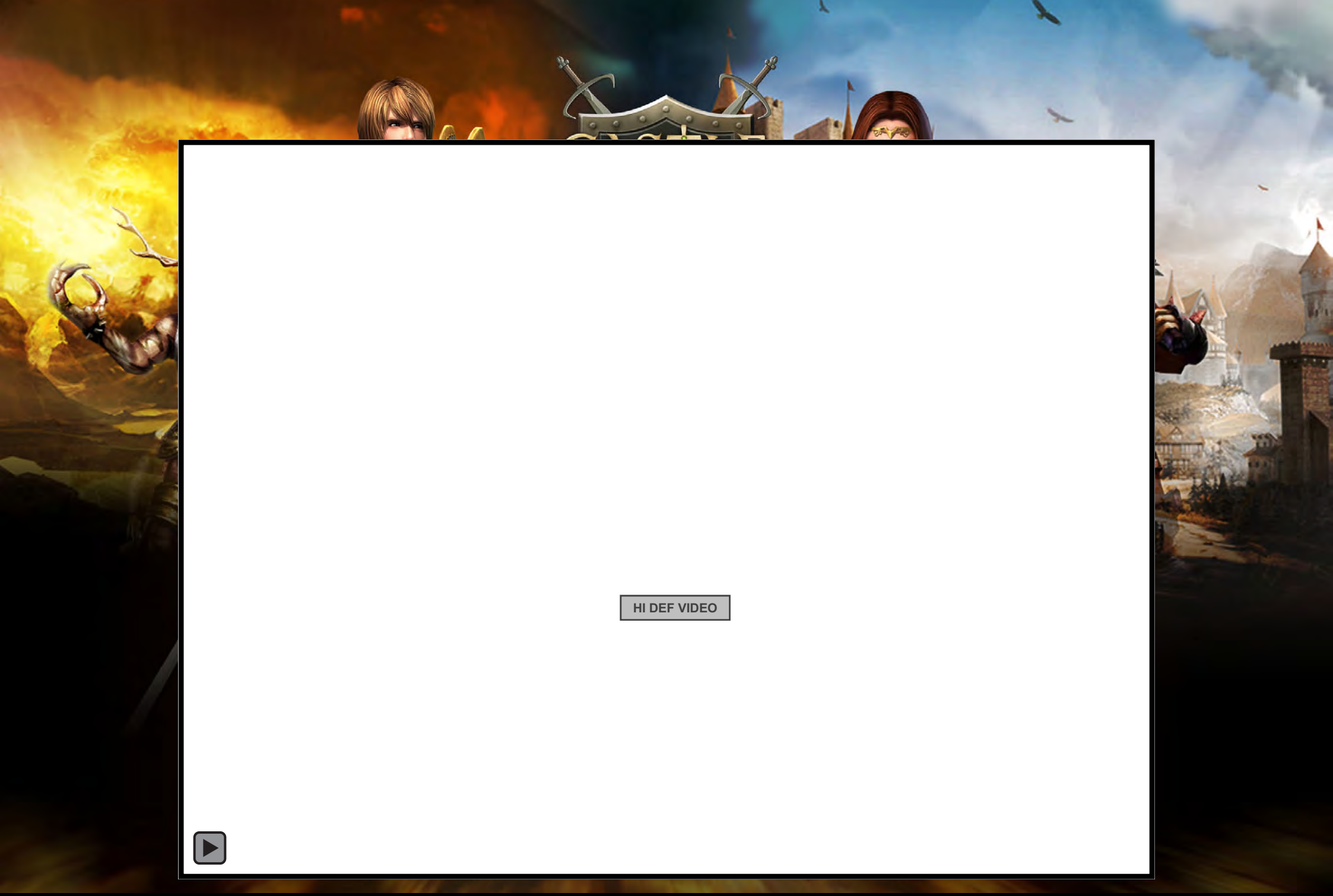
seems rife for exploitation, let alone a game where player corruption and exploitation is rife, but we would be very surprised if there wasn't a risk versus reward structure to stop one audience bullying the other outright.

A CASUAL RELATIONSHIP?

Undoubtedly the relationship between *EVE* and *Dust 514* is what interests us the most, but its free-to-play nature should attract certainly attract a large portion of the PS3's casual crowd. As a standalone game, *Dust 514* is shaping up to be a solid online shooter with skirmishes involving as many as 42 players and a fleet of vehicles which can be customised to the nth degree.

Cross-platform play isn't new to the MMO scene – notably *RIFT*'s mobile app which allows players to earn in-game loot while not adventuring – but CCP are taking the idea to a whole new level. We have no idea how it'll all pan out yet, but we're immensely excited to be privy to the journey. Here's hoping CCP can change the MMO landscape for the better, as they've managed to do before. ■

There will be multiple character classes, all of which are customisable.



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COMMAND & CONQUER TIBERIUM ALLIANCES

HANDS-ON

PUB: ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEV: EA PHENOMIC
LAST GAME: LORD OF ULTIMA
ETA: 2012

QUICK QUOTES

> *Worlds are unfathomably large with neighbours able to roll up into your base with Guardian tanks and Pitbull buggies - if they commit to waiting long enough.*

Collective security

As much as it pains us to admit it, browser-based games are becoming big business, especially if you possess a license which is fondly remembered by gaming society.

Tiberium Alliances is the latest effort by EA Phenomic to revive a property which has faded into obscurity, and while it harvests the art design, setting and even the soundtrack of previous games in this RTS series, unfortunately it hasn't inherited its soul.

Like other turn-based free-to-play experiences, players are tasked with building a base from scratch and forming alliances on servers, populated by as many as 25,000 players. As you'd expect, worlds are unfathomably large with neighbours able to roll up into your base with Guardian tanks and Pitbull buggies – if they commit to waiting long enough. Thankfully there's a step-by-step tutorial which introduces and explains the minutiae associated with establishing your base, forming a stable economy and clearing out local miscreants rather well – mostly by upgrading existing structures and waiting for your coffers to replenish themselves over time. It's a framework very reminiscent of *Might and Magic: Heroes Kingdoms* but without the season-to-season format and diverse factions – instead Tiberium Alliances' Beta only supports the NOD faction. The constant red-on-red action leads to battles which feel unfulfilling and fiddly, with unit formation proving just as important as make-up.

The engine itself also struggles to keep up with user commands sometimes, due to the browser tech relying on server-side grunt to deliver the game's surprisingly pretty visuals. Everything is still sprite-based, but the unit and building animations allow this free-to-play experience to stand out.

Tiberium Alliances is still in open Beta and Phenomic are changing their strategy game regularly to address fan feedback, however for the moment there isn't much that sets this game apart from the army of others out there. Check it out after a few more updates. ■

GDI forces weren't present in the build we sampled, but they are coming.

The only way to last longer than the prescribed tutorial safety period is to team up with your neighbours.

Battles are wave-based and involve units rolling across the screen from the bottom to the top.

TRIBES: ASCEND

ROLL OVER FOR INFO!

Ski your way to success

PUB: HI-REZ STUDIOS
DEV: IN-HOUSE
LAST GAME: GLOBAL AGENDA
ETA: OUT NOW

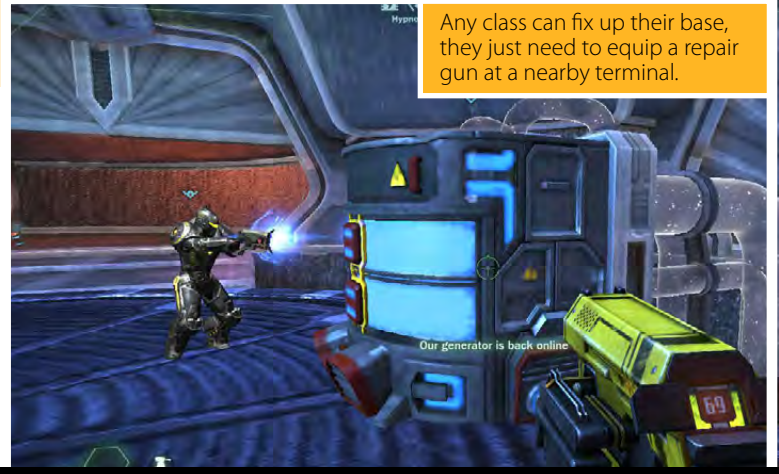
Zap. Zip. Zoom. Slash. Grab. Slide. Die. *Tribes: Ascend* certainly is a high-octane experience. This free-to-play FPS isn't exactly a typical MMO affair with no plot development, no overworld and a pure focus on competitive multiplayer. Hi-Rez Studio's follow-up to *Global Agenda* isn't trying to form a narrative or create a world in which you want to belong, instead they're trying to recreate an online sport from yesteryear. One which requires pixel-perfect precision, lots of moment-to-moment decisions and deep complexity on maps which are just as compelling as any PvP experience we've ever had the pleasure of taking part in.

From the first moment you jump into *Tribes* it's an immensely freeing experience, thanks to every character class possessing their own jet pack and frictionless skis which allow you to ascend high into the sky or zip along the floor, gathering momentum as you travel down negative gradients.

These two gameplay additions coupled with traditional point-and-shoot first-person shooter gameplay, inevitably lead to a feeling of abundant empowerment. Mastering these components while keeping track of enemy players takes a fair amount of getting used to. You'll need to aim with the upmost precision, often ahead of a player's trajectory, partly because maps are so large but mostly because the always-human enemies are just as mobile as you are.

Where the additional complexity comes in is via *Tribes'* nine different classes, all of which have dozens of different unlocks involving equipment, weapons, propulsion boosters, suit skins and the like. All of these can either be unlocked via earned experience or gold purchased with real cash, but unlike the vast majority of free-to-play games you never feel at a disadvantage to those with more capital than commitment. The key is that are the base weapons for each class, more than half of which need to be unlocked, which are sufficient to earn enough kills to progress your favourite role, be it fast-moving Pathfinder, turret-packing Technician or immovable Juggernaut. The

Ascend also has a spectator mode so you can watch how other players get it done live. However, you can't record matches and watch them back, at least for the moment.



Any class can fix up their base, they just need to equip a repair gun at a nearby terminal.

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Due to each class's destructive potential, vehicles aren't as important as they are in other shooters.

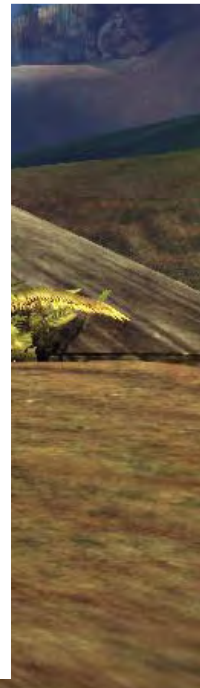
feeling of progression is constant and palpable as you earn more equipment and upgrades – all the time becoming a better player, rewarded with badges, additional XP perks and gaining access to more game modes. Admittedly we spent most of our time taking part in the substantially more tactical Capture the Flag mode rather than the Team Deathmatch one, but we never felt like we were missing out.

The intricacies of CtF are heightened in *Tribes: Ascend* with each team's base having their own auto-targeting turrets and radar powered by a vulnerable hidden generator When taken out this makes your team's flag even easier for your foes to steal, so team's delegate those who stay behind and those that go on the attack. Despite always playing with 'randoms' on public servers we were always impressed to see how naturally teams delegated these roles, often without open communication. The UI and arena announcer constantly keeps you updated on team matters at all times, and players just naturally adjust. Whether that's by excellent game design, affective matchmaking or an extremely well-drilled community we're not sure, but we regularly had matches which were close and exciting. Within the over-arching economy there's also another contained entirely within any match. Whenever you do something positive for a team, be it fixing equipment, stopping a capture, picking up a flag or killing an enemy, you'll be rewarded with credits which can then be spent on calling in support equipment, upgrading HQ tech, or purchasing vehicles like tanks, speeders and aircraft. This additional layer of complexity gives you a lot to think about with regards to where you want to spawn a resupply point replenishing your ammo or whether you should upgrade your base's turrets in order to give your team a better chance of repelling invasion.

> *"The feeling of progression is constant as you earn more equipment"*

It's these kinds of options which kept us entertained long after we got to grips with the precision associated with painting an enemy with bullets, and we suspect that's why we'll return to *Ascend* time and time again. ■

Post match, there are lots of statistics to get lost in.



FINAL VERDICT

Competitive play doesn't get more exciting than this!

90

- ➕ Free-to-play as it was meant to be
- ➖ Not many games modes but more will be added soon

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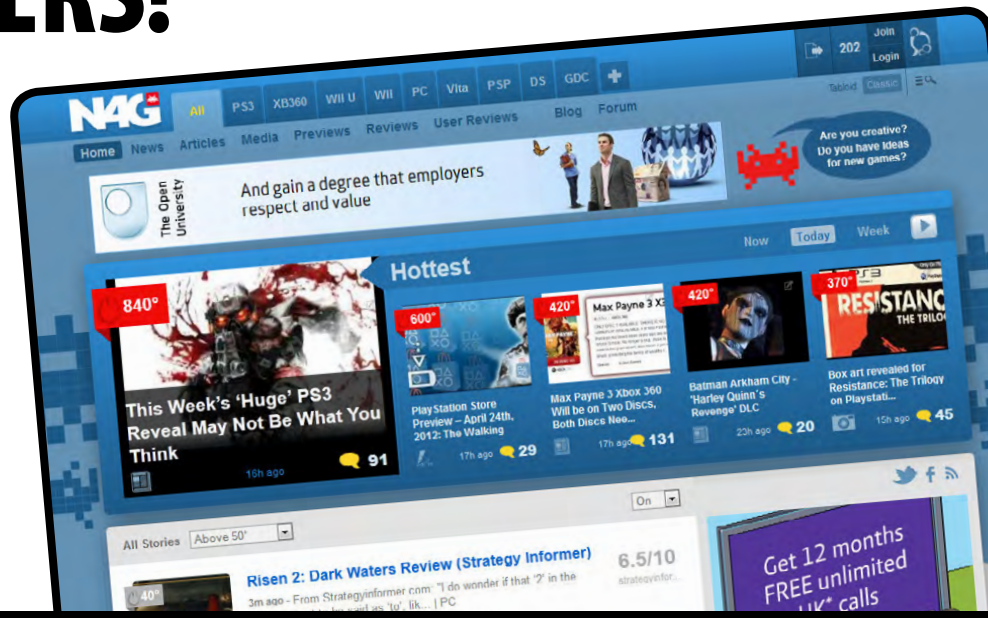

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